

# COMMUNISM AND EUROPEAN JEWRY

By ROBERT SMITH

COMMUNISM is destined to play an increasingly important part in the struggle for the soul of Jewry. About one third of the Jews in the world are now in Communist-dominated countries, and the influence of Communist revolutionary ideas can be expected to spread among Jews in other countries, including Palestine. There are many causes which make the Jews peculiarly susceptible to this influence. We must, however, be careful to avoid generalizations. It would be very dangerous to identify the Jews with Communism in such a way as to lend support to anti-Semitic propaganda. The facts are not so simple. It is particularly difficult to collect evidence about the extent of Jewish membership in Communist parties, and it is important to remember that membership may often be compulsory. A minority like the Jews is in no position to stand out against a prevailing totalitarian régime. It is also necessary to examine carefully the reasons for the genuine sympathy for Communism which one finds among Jews. An attempt to deal with this question, however tentatively, may help to throw some light on the problem of the Christian approach to the Jews, to explain the failure of the Church as compared with the success of Communist propaganda, and so to guide us towards more effective missionary methods.

## THE JEWS IN RUSSIA

Before the war there were just over three million Jews in Russia, mostly in the Ukraine and White Russia, in the areas most severely devastated by the war. Officially there is no Jewish problem in Russia, and the scanty information which is allowed to reach us simply confirms the propaganda picture of a paradise in which Communism has put an end to racial conflicts. Such optimism is compulsory under any Communist régime. We can guess the price paid for this peace. There has been forcible assimilation of Jewish cultural organizations, and religious freedom is limited by the over-riding demands of loyalty to the absolute, infallible state or party. There may have been some opposition from orthodox Jews, as suggested by the numbers of refugees fleeing to the west from Soviet-occupied Poland, the Baltic States and Ruthenia. The economic structure of Jewish life has been drastically changed. The few Jewish capitalists have disappeared, and many of the 'bourgeois' intellectuals, traders and

pedlars have been absorbed in industry or in the civil service. Nevertheless, there are solid grounds for believing that the mass of the Jews have accepted the change with contentment.

(a) The experience of persecution under the Tsars prepared the Jews to welcome a revolution which promised to put an end to pogroms and racial discrimination. Actually it was the Provisional Government of 1917 that removed their disabilities, but a guarantee of racial equality was embodied in the Soviet constitution and seems to have been sincerely respected as regards the Jews.

(b) Impartial observers agree on the whole that the nationality policy of the Soviets has been successful in bringing unity to the peoples of Russia, an impression which seems to be borne out by their war record.

(c) Jews were prominent in the early phases of the revolution and, in spite of a reduction in their influence after 1921 (the stage of the New Economic Policy), the Jews of Russia have had opportunities of active participation in great political experiments and in the management of a vast country. This experience must have bound them to Russia as strongly as the Jews were bound to Germany in the time of the Liberal emancipation, or to America more recently.

(d) To a people with such experience of persecution, security is more important than freedom. The Russian Jews are unlikely to miss what they have never known, and the rights of equal citizenship in a great Russian republic may well be regarded as ample compensation for the loss of distinctive traditions.

(e) Finally, since we know so little of what is happening inside Russia, we must pick up what clues we can from those who have been there. It is significant that some of the most fanatical Communist leaders in Czechoslovakia and Hungary were Jews who had been trained in Moscow during the war—a sign that residence in Russia does not disillusion the Jew as it did so many other non-Russian Communists who served in the Russian army.

#### OTHER EASTERN EUROPEAN COUNTRIES—THE MISSIONARY EXPANSION OF COMMUNISM

So far as we can judge, then, the Jews of Russia are conditioned to Communism and are becoming its active missionaries. In the other countries of the Soviet sphere the same process has begun, but the circumstances are in certain respects different. With its westward expansion, Communism comes up against special problems. Roumania and Bulgaria have already reached an advanced stage. Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia contain the only other large Jewish populations left in Europe. In these countries, especially in

Poland and Hungary, the Jews supplied the absence of a middle class and occupied key positions in professional and commercial life. Their interests and natural inclinations would certainly have linked them with the opponents of Communism. But the war and the Nazi persecutions destroyed the basis of capitalist society in these countries. The confiscation of Jewish property inevitably prepared the way for nationalization after the war. Even so, the first impulse of the Jews who returned from concentration camps was to pick up the threads of their former way of life, to recover what they could of their private property and to start private enterprises. In the same way the Jewish communities were chiefly concerned with rehabilitation questions. When they met with difficulties, many middle-class Jews sought to emigrate, particularly those who had been refugees in the west during the war. Others found that the easiest way to rehabilitation was through state service. Many joined the ministries of the governments-in-exile as Communists, and some Communist ministries (e.g. the Ministry of Information in Prague) were from the beginning largely staffed with Jewish intellectuals. One Christian official, a zealous worker against anti-Semitism, described to me his anti-Semitic feelings when he found himself in a minority of one at a meeting of departmental officials. In Budapest a Christian friend, pointing to the photographs of party leaders during the elections, told me that all of them were Jews. In Czechoslovakia, Mr Slansky, the General Secretary of the Communist Party, is one of a number of Jewish Communists who had an important share in drawing up the party programme and carrying through the *coup d'état* of 1948. Some of them were undoubtedly opportunists, but others belong to the hard core of convinced and clever Communists to whom the party owes its drive and its ruthless efficiency. I do not think the proportion of Jewish Communists was greater than among the rest of the population. In Czechoslovakia after the revolution, three successive purges were necessary to bring the Council of the Prague Jewish Community into Communist hands. The resulting Council consisted of men who were almost strangers to the Synagogue and who had no experience of office in the community. But we must remember that in the Communist party the real power lies in a very few hands. A Jew like Mr Slansky in a key position has tremendous influence. In a popular pamphlet on the organization of the party he stresses the importance of iron discipline, and recommends that no local party should have more than fifty or a hundred members. The party has no use for nominal members who only subscribe and attend occasional meetings. Every member must be instructed and convinced and must take his share of the daily routine work, the door-to-door propaganda and office administration as well as the big political decisions. In this intense and urgent missionary activity the Jew shines.

## COMMUNISM AND THE NON-COMMUNIST JEW

I have said that the Communist Jew is a minority in Czechoslovakia, and the Communist policy admits the existence of the anti-Communist Jew. He raises a problem for Communist theory. As victims of Fascism and racialism all Jews are under-privileged and should welcome Communism as a deliverance. But the programme of the Czechoslovak Communists, after condemning anti-Semitism and pledging equal citizenship rights to the Jews, goes on to stress that the Jewish capitalist must be treated like any other capitalist, and the German-speaking Jew must be deprived of citizenship like any other German. Here we see the curious corruption of Communism as it has developed in post-war Czechoslovakia. Class-hatred corrupts the sympathy for the oppressed race which should in theory make the Communist a brother to all Jews. And race-hatred of the Germans arises to corrupt the ideal of human equality. In practice Communism cuts the Gordian knot by a simple generalization. German equals Fascist, and Fascist equals non-Communist. In the last resort any individual or nation that opposes the Communist aims is labelled Fascist and thereby deprived of human rights. Thus it comes about that the middle-class Jew who has experience of a higher standard of living or who has known western conceptions of individual liberty fears Communism and usually chooses emigration. A Jewish business man who had refused an offer of a well-paid post in a nationalized industry said to me: 'I would rather have the lowest place in a capitalist country than the highest post in a Communist country'. The Communists, perhaps under the influence of Jews in the government, have so far facilitated the emigration of Jews, and it must be stressed that this emigration is not due to anti-Semitism but to dissatisfaction with political and economic conditions. Nevertheless it is a sign of the failure of Communism to extend its appeal to Jews as such, and suggests that the movement which undoubtedly meant progress for the masses of Russia cannot expand westwards without first producing an equality of need, and reducing other countries to the Russian standards.

## JEWS IN GERMANY

The failure of the Allies to solve the problem of the displaced persons has supplied Communism with propaganda material, and the camps in Germany form a fruitful breeding-ground for Communism as well as for Zionism. It is probably true that the Jewish Communists have more power in the Soviet zone than any Jews in the western zones. The passionate hatred of German Fascism is

fanned by Communism to revolutionary heat, although Russia has done nothing to solve the problem of the displaced persons except to encourage illegal emigration to Palestine, and the mass expulsions of Germans and others from countries in the Soviet sphere make matters very much worse.

### COMMUNISM AND ZIONISM

The Communist support of Zionism is not generally understood. It is more sincere than we are apt to believe, but it is an opportunist policy. There are two dominant motives. The first is anti-imperialism, which aims at undermining British or American power in the Near East and encouraging the revolt of the Jews as of all other subject peoples (also the Arabs). The second is the revolutionary strategy of Lenin, who laid down the rule that any national or bourgeois revolution should be supported as a first stage towards the goal of a Communist revolution. Zionism is not encouraged in Russia, and from the Communist point of view it is not a completely satisfactory revolutionary movement. It is too dependent on American capital, and Israel might become a capitalist state under American protection. But a movement of national liberation, if continued and carried further under revolutionary direction, might ultimately be developed into a genuine Communist revolution. Russia accordingly has a double interest in the continuance of chaos in the Near East. This explains why all the resources of Communist propaganda in eastern Europe have been used (a) to attack British rule in Palestine, (b) to encourage illegal immigration and terrorist tactics, and (c) to promote the growth of a more radical Jewish labour group. Communists suspect the Zionist movement of being too much under American influence, and some attempt may be made to capture it for Communism. There seems little prospect at present of Israel becoming a Communist state, but the Communist colonies have played an important part in shaping Jewish life in Palestine, and we may ask ourselves what would happen if international Zionism failed, or if Palestine were involved in a long struggle for existence. Would Israel be driven towards a totalitarian form of government? Or would the Jews of the world, robbed of the hope of Zionism, turn to Communism in despair?

### THE APPEAL OF COMMUNISM TO THE JEW

It is the strength of Communism that it appeals both to higher and lower motives, to spiritual ideals and to material interests. Christianity cannot meet its challenge by denying its ideals, or by depreciating the material progress which it promises. Christianity

must condemn it as a heretical corruption of prophetic religion which, because it is without faith in Christ, arrogates to itself power which rightly belongs to God alone, and so becomes idolatrous, perverts its own truth, brings judgment upon itself by its own abuse of power and in the end destroys itself, having served its divine purpose of judging the Church and the world. Communism is born of faith and frustration, hope and despair, truth and hypocrisy, and it is necessary to disentangle the complicated strands of good and evil and to provide both a positive and a negative answer.

Communism appeals to the Jew as a prophetic movement which condemns the unrighteousness of society and demands a higher standard of justice.

Communism appeals to the Jew as a movement for the emancipation of oppressed peoples.

Communism appeals to the Jew because it offers him membership of a great world society in which he can work and serve.

Communism appeals to the Jew because it promises him the establishment of a new world order which is the final stage of human progress.

Here we have four things which belong to the essence of prophetic religion—righteousness, salvation, the servant people or the Church and the Kingdom of eschatology.

But Communism is also a secularized, godless religion which makes its appeal to those who have lost faith in God and who seek to bring in the kingdom by violence. It carries out its judgment without mercy, and claims to fulfil its own righteousness; it brings about its own salvation through its own sacrifice, and modern science is its *deus ex machina*; it chooses its own church and serves its own will; it establishes its own kingdom, and creates its own heaven and hell. The Nazi persecutions made of the Jews a vast proletariat, without security and without the most elementary human rights, with 'nothing to lose but their chains'. It was ideal material for a Marxist revolution. Hatred of their persecutors naturally drove them to the extreme of anti-Fascism. Communism offered them the revolutionary revenge for which they craved. In their disillusionment and cynicism Communism seemed all the more attractive because it was frankly materialistic. In their frustration and impatience they wanted a religion of quick results and assured profits, and Communism was there, with not only a programme and a prophecy, but a way to get things done, to shorten the times and hasten the Day of the Lord.

### THE FAILURE OF THE CHURCH

It must be frankly confessed that the Church failed the Jews in their crisis, and that Christianity was never presented to them as a

real alternative to Communism. The Church failed because it was not there, it did not care, and it did not share. In the concentration camps there were far more Communists than Christians. Occasional resolutions of protest against anti-Semitism were not enough to convince the Jews that Christians were deeply concerned about their fate. The Church did not descend with them into hell. It seemed to the Jews that the majority of Christians were content to enjoy the privileges of the Aryans, while Jews and Communists shared the sufferings of Christ. In our aloofness and detachment we expected gratitude for the charity of our refugee and relief work, while the Jews demanded justice as their elementary human right. The concern of many individual Christians could not compensate for the indifference of the Church as a whole, and the complacency which again and again failed to face up to the realities of the Jewish situation. Christian nations opened their doors too late and too cautiously to the victims of anti-Semitism. And when, after the war, the allied nations had the responsibility of solving the problems created by Nazi persecution, the Church again failed to get things done. Christians had lost the initiative in the attack upon evil, and the gospel of salvation to the oppressed had fallen into the hands of the revolutionaries. Christian evangelism was vitiated by a false spirituality, which seemed to have no concern for translating religion into life, and a false individualism which seemed to ignore their most vital contemporary problems. A Church which had nothing to do with politics, nothing to do with the social revolution and nothing to do with daily work and daily bread—such a Church had nothing to do with the Jews.

#### SOME CONDITIONS FOR A NEW EVANGELISM

It seems to me possible and indeed probable that, in seeking both a negative and a positive answer to Communism, the Church may find a new Christian approach to the Jews. We must be prepared for the success of Communism and its growing influence. But we must also be prepared for the time when Communism will reveal its hollowness and destructiveness, and will bring disillusionment and despair to those who have placed their trust in it. And the Jews who have committed themselves to this faith most eagerly will be among the first to suffer disillusionment. In readiness for this opportunity we must now try to fulfil the following conditions for a new evangelism:

1. We must frankly face the judgment of Communism on the witness and life of the Church.
2. We must seek to reinterpret and revitalize the truths of Christianity which Communism distorts, especially the prophetic

emphasis on universal judgment, the deliverance of the poor and oppressed, the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth and the Church which is the Body of the Incarnate Lord.

3. We must also seek to understand the truths of Christianity which Communism lacks or ignores, such as the reign of God in history, the forgiveness of sins, the Resurrection of the Body, the Holy Spirit, the Communion of Saints and the Life Everlasting.

4. We must show that Christianity is really more revolutionary and more progressive than Communism, and so recapture the initiative which the Church has lost. But at the same time we must show the Church as the guardian of those values which Communism destroys, but which Christ eternally preserves through every revolution. He is come to fulfil the law and the prophets.

5. We must make the attempt to translate these theological truths into action in the spheres which most concern the Jews, not excluding the political, economic and social spheres, remembering that it is part of the prophetic function of the Church to witness to the judgment of God in history in deed as well as in word.

6. In seeking to win the Jews to the Christian Church, we must see to it that we are not simply inviting them to join a religious society. The Jew must find in the Church a fellowship of worship and of service which will demand his allegiance even more effectively than Communism with its iron discipline and commitment to the cause of the world revolution.

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